

Tokyo 2020: The Paralympic dream that started at the supermarket

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SHARDEA ARIAS DE LA CRUZ

Shardea Arias de la Cruz, centre, with her team for the Tokyo 2020 Paralympic Games

Aruba had never had a Paralympic team until Shardea Arias de la Cruz, a student in her 20s, decided to make it happen. From finding her first athlete at the supermarket, to his disappearance at the Rio games, this is a story of

jeopardy, hustling and absolute belief. Now another shining star - Elliott Loonstra - is ready to represent the island at the Tokyo Paralympics.

The music pumped loudly as the swimmers walked towards their blocks at Rio 2016, hats slick to heads, acknowledging the cheering crowd.

Shardea, president of the Aruba team, sat poolside, her chest bursting with pride as she waited for her tiny island's first ever Paralympic athlete to appear.

But as the swimmers lined-up, one lane remained empty. Aruba's.

What had happened to her swimmer?

"We're very warm-hearted," says Shardea about the 110,000 people who live on Aruba that she calls "a very tiny dot off the coast of Venezuela" in the south of the Caribbean.

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It is 20 miles (32km) long and six miles (9.6km) wide. With its turquoise ocean and white beaches, many would call it paradise.

The economy is largely based on tourism so, to cater for this, many islanders speak four languages - Dutch, English, Spanish and the local Creole language, Papiamentu.

Shardea moved to America to attend university, drawn there by softball in which she became a prize-winning player. She studied exercise and rehabilitative sciences but something else stole her heart.

"I volunteered at a Special Olympics camp and I fell in love with disability sport," she says.

The organisation encourages people with learning disabilities to get involved in sport.

It lit a "passion" and Shardea tweaked her degree as a result, to include adaptive physical activity before continuing with a Masters so she could work with disabled people.

While she studied, she Googled: "Aruba Paralympic Committee". But every time she typed it in, the same answer came back. There was no such thing.

She knew what she had to do.

"I set out to found Aruba's Paralympic Committee. I was 23 years old."

The young graduate didn't see the point in starting small. When she returned to Aruba, she went straight to the top and secured an internship with the Ministry of Tourism, Public Health and Sports where she gained access to the island's Olympic Committee.

She quizzed its members, read books about the Paralympic Games and made connections, her aspirations fuelled by the inequality disabled islanders faced.

"At that time, having a disability in Aruba was taboo. You would rarely see a person with a disability. We have a lot of community events and usually people with disabilities would be excluded," she says. "That didn't sit well with me."

Shardea took every "opportunity" to get the ball rolling.

She reached out to the International Paralympic Committee (IPC) which supported her ambition. She started to attend its events all over the world from Canada to Suriname, Curacao to Spain, which gave her the chance to talk to people involved in the movement.

She attended every workshop offered, even if she knew the topic, just to meet people who might help her cause.

Aruba is part of The Kingdom of the Netherlands. The Dutch government controls defence and foreign affairs while the island's government handles local matters.

The Netherlands, helpfully, has a long-established Paralympic team which meant Shardea had a pool of experts to call-on.

Marlou van Rhijn, known as the Blade Babe, was one of those people. Born without legs below both knees, she became a world record holder in 100m and 200m sprints. She gave Shardea an important insight into the drive, dedication and money it takes to be a top athlete.

On the matter of setting up an organisation, the National Paralympic Committee for the Netherlands advised her on how a committee is formed and maintained, and what it requires to become a success.

But there was something missing - athletes.

Shardea, who is not disabled, didn't have any for her team and she had no idea how to find them.

The problem was bandied about by the small group she had built around her, but no one had come up with a solution.

On the way to the supermarket one afternoon in 2015, under the beating sun, she happened to spot a man in a wheelchair.

"When I saw him I was pretty much seizing on an opportunity," she says. "He had long arms and looked athletic so I thought 'why not?'"

She turned to her friend, a swimming coach, and grinned. "Let's approach him," she dared, thinking this man would make a good swimmer.

They walked quickly and excitedly towards him. "We asked him if he would like to go on this journey."

Jesus De Marchena Acevedo squinted at them in confusion. He had only gone out to pick-up some essentials and was sceptical of these strangers with their even stranger offer. He thanked them for the opportunity but didn't accept it.

"We had to persuade him," Shardea says.

Although she didn't know Jesus, she knew of him. Shardea's full-time job was teaching PE at Colegio Nigel Matthew, a local school, and she knew one of her pupils was his sister. Together, they hatched a plan and made a pincer-move on him until he agreed.



Jesus De Marchena Acevedo sitting on the poolside at Rio

In that instant, Jesus became a history-maker as Aruba's first ever Paralympic athlete.

Though it may sound like the plot to a quirky 90s movie, Shardea had seen how disabled people in America and the Netherlands had benefited from being involved in disability sport and she wanted to share that with Aruba.

Jesus was born with spina bifida. His spinal cord didn't develop properly in the womb, causing a gap in his spine and weakness in his legs. He uses a wheelchair to get around.

While he had learned to swim as a child, it wasn't something he'd done as an adult.

"We basically had to start from scratch," Shardea says.

They got him back in the pool, started weight training and worked with a nutritionist to ensure everything Jesus ate fuelled his body.

"We had to feel our way through this, but we have a pretty good system in place for elite [Olympic] athletes in Aruba. We tried to use all of the resources we could to get him as prepared as possible."

Come early 2016, the team's dedication paid off and they received the news that Jesus had been offered a wildcard to compete at the Paralympic Games in Rio that summer.

"It was crazy," Shardea says. "He had never done an international competition prior to that. Locally he didn't do any competitions either."

They were excited about Rio, but the Games would also turn out to be one of the biggest lessons they would learn.

Panic

On arrival in Brazil, Jesus was officially classified.

The classification process takes athletes, tests them, and groups them based on their level of impairment - that's when they are given the letter and number combination we are now used to seeing in para sports. While some athletes attend classification before the Games, others are assessed at the event.

Shardea and her team were confident Jesus would be graded S4 for swimmers with good use of their arms but no use of their legs.

But the official didn't agree and classed him S9 - for those with severe weakness in one leg

It was a shock to the team, they knew Jesus would struggle in that category, but they had to remain positive. Despite the setback they had everything to play for.

On the day of competition they left nothing to chance. "We got to the facility three hours early," Shardea says, she was keen that their inexperience didn't get in the way of racing.

Jesus was called through with the other competitors while Shardea sat poolside knowing everyone at home would be rooting for them.

As the music pumped and the swimmers paraded out for the 50m freestyle, Shardea felt ecstatic - they had made it.

She looked along the line of swimmers in turn. Unease bubbled-up before panic set in - Jesus wasn't there.

"I was waiting to see him," Shardea recalls. She looked around, desperately trying to make sense of his absence, praying he would appear at any moment.

As the swimmers stretched and flexed before the start, she received a phone call. It was from Jesus' coach telling her their swimming had been disqualified.

She was shocked and confused and headed straight to the administration area, away from the pool, where she was informed there had been a "miscommunication".

They told her Jesus had lined-up behind his competitors ready to race. At the last minute a Games volunteer said he was in the wrong line and needed to move. He followed the advice before he realised the volunteer had not been right and he was now in the wrong line.

Jesus alerted the people around him and was ushered towards the pool hoping to catch-up with the rest of the swimmers, but by the time he reached them, he was told: "Sorry, you're too late," and disqualified.

"I was devastated," Shardea says. The scale of the event had beaten them. "Coming from a small island, we do not have facilities that are that big. Once you show up at the pool everyone knows you're there."



She spoke with the organisers who shrugged and said they were following rules and all she could do was write to the UK's Sir Philip Craven, who was President of the IPC at the time.

She followed the advice and explained in a letter what had happened - they were inexperienced, they were not versed in the Games protocol, it had taken everything to get Aruba to Rio.

A verdict was returned - Jesus could compete in another event, the 100m freestyle.

"Thank God, we were able to get through that moment," Shardea says, the relief palpable five years on.

The race, was several days later, but it was over a racing distance Jesus wasn't prepared for. The 50m freestyle was his speciality, and this was double that.

On the day of competition, Jesus felt unsettled. He was shaken by his last experience and intimidated by the athletes in his class.

As the swimmers were announced to the world, Jesus was the only one who had to transfer from his wheelchair into the pool to start from the side. The other swimmers were able to stand on the diving blocks.

"It was very hard for him," Shardea remembers. "He ended up being, of course, last. The crowd was wonderful, because they were shouting 'Jesus, Jesus'. He got a big roar and that was a special moment."

It created one of the magical, unifying moments the Paralympics is known for - but it crushed Jesus.

He returned to the island a celebrity, but he didn't want to talk about what had happened. He was shocked by his classification and although the island was proud of him, everyone knew he had lost his race.

Not only that, but the whole world had seen him finish more than a minute behind the rest of the field.

"It was very tough for him," Shardea recounts. "The moment was a bit too much because now he's not practising any more, he didn't want to continue.

"We're trying not to make that mistake again ... with Elliot."

Aruba in Japan

Elliott Loonstra is the island's star for Tokyo 2020.

He won't be in the pool but in the dojo, a hall where martial arts is practised, creating a double first - he's the first Aruban to compete in para-taekwondo, and it's the first Paralympic Games to host the sport.

Following Rio, where Jesus made his brief appearance, the IPC advised Shardea to source and nurture athletes over time. "I think that's a better setup rather than just: 'Hey you, come do this'," she laughs.

The small Aruban committee visited schools and identified five teenagers who are excelling in judo, athletics, boccia and swimming. Shardea also started hosting coaching courses for the community which is where Elliott emerged from.

He had been working at one of the islands scuba diving shops - "testing the tanks and making sure they don't explode" - when a friend, Luciano Mazzeo, asked if he wanted to give taekwondo a go.

Luciano is considered a Master of the sport - someone of great experience. He coached taekwondo on the island, alongside his day-job as a web developer, and attended one of Shardea's coaching sessions and decided he wanted to get involved with para-taekwondo.

Elliott had tried taekwondo as a youngster but a savage kick to the chest had "freaked" him out and he'd quit. At the age of 28 he felt ready to try again.

Full of kicks and twists, para-taekwondo requires exceptional balance from Elliott who has no arm below the right elbow. He competes in the K44 classification, for those with an arm amputation on one side or a loss of toes which impacts the ability to lift the heel. He's in the +75kg weight category.





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With no access to facilities on the island, Elliott and Luciano started training on the beaches that tourists pay thousands to lie on, but this more challenging environment has become Elliott's secret weapon.

"We'd run along the beach and do kicks. By doing them in the sand, which is always shifting, you have to develop your balance a lot quicker," he says.

His stamina and technique rapidly improved and he started going to a public gym to incorporate weight and resistance training into his workouts.

"For the actual sport, I made a little dojo in the back garden with some floor mats. If we don't have a space [to train in] we go there, but it's kind of small for the practice."

Training facilities were not the only problem. There are only three taekwondo fighters good enough for Elliott to practise against on the island and in para-taekwondo "it's just me," he says. "I'm the whole team. Me and my coach. That's it."

Shardea and Luciano hit it off after the community coaching session and had kept in touch.

When Luciano spotted potential in Elliott "he immediately contacted me," Shardea says, who set about supporting Luciano to develop Elliott and his talent.

She also knew she had to expose Elliott to international competition early on so he didn't experience what Jesus had. It wasn't just the sport, it was also the razzmatazz - the crowd, the huge stadia and the expectations.

The Parapan American Games, a multi-sport event held in Lima, Peru, in 2019, gave Elliott his first taste of international competition and an indication of what Tokyo might be like.

As the nations paraded around alphabetically at the opening ceremony, Elliott carried the flag for Aruba's team of one, sandwiched between Argentina and Brazil's huge 90-strong teams.

"It made me nervous, but at the same time, I was like 'I'm the only one representing Aruba. Let's do this. Gotta represent'," he says.

Elliot didn't make it through to the second round, but he was rewarded in other ways. "We learned a lot, we made new connections so in the end I think it went very well," he says.

When Elliott steps out at the Makuhari Messe venue for para-taekwondo in Tokyo, he knows that people back home will be following his progress.

The island

A video of the standing ovation Jesus received in Rio went viral after the 2016 Games and made an impression. Shardea says it started to change attitudes about disability on Aruba.

"There were more people with disabilities coming out to the supermarket. Now I see there's a lot more integration."

The local para-taekwondo hero, Elliot, describes being disabled on the island as "tricky" with little effort made to make anything accessible.

"People with disabilities are, to a certain degree, either left behind or hidden away," he says, and he knows people who feel like "outcasts" as a result.



Elliott himself has experienced discrimination when applying for jobs. He says he has been passed over by several companies who made the incorrect assumption he is unable to lift anything due to having one hand.

He and Shardea are ready for the awareness-kick the Tokyo Games will likely bring, and how they can get islanders to think more positively about disabled people.

Shardea has great ambition. Forget the usual five-year-plans people often work towards, she is focused on the next 15.

She wants a Paralympic bus to get athletes to their training or to the doctors because public buses are not accessible, and she dreams of a fully accessible gym for disabled islanders.

But there is one crucial piece of the plan that Shardea can't seem to make headway with despite her grit and determination: money.

She has become adept at filling out grant applications to source funds for the Aruban Paralympic team but the amounts she gets often falls short. "If we ask for \$100 we get \$20," she says.

Elliott's mum has held cake sales which have paid for a \$2,000 (£1,454) airline ticket to Tokyo. Grants from the IPC have paid for Elliot's kit.

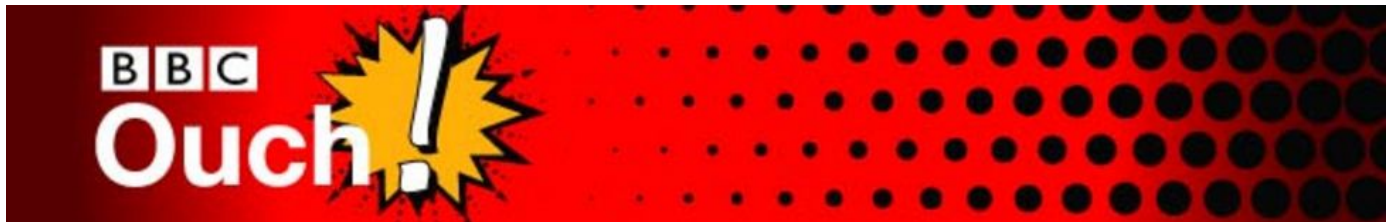
"You have to hustle for what you want," Shardea says. "This is a better way because not only are we doing fundraising events but we're also raising awareness."

And now it is time for their hard work to be seen on a world stage.

"I'm excited," Elliott says. "I don't feel nervous at all." But he admits the nerves will kick-in when he walks into the Makuhari Messe on Saturday morning.

"It should be an exciting time," Shardea reassures him, grinning with the excitement of what is to come, confident they are old-hands now. "And Elliot has what it takes."

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